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DESIGN FOR A MODELED PANEL. DRAWN FROM THE ORIGINAL SKETCH BY SOPHIE BERTHA STEEL.

### THE NUDE IN ART.

AN INTERVIEW WITH NAPOLEON SARONY.

BY WILLIAM R. BRADSHAW.



NOW that the question of the nude in art has been again revived by the action of certain overzealous persons who have lately been seeking to obtain legislation in the State Legislature (and incidentally some notoriety for themselves) to prohibit the exhibition of representations of the nude human figure under any circumstances, the report of an interview with that prince of photographers, Napoleon Sarony, of this city, will be of interest to our readers.

The immense apartment which is used by Sarony as reception room and office is in itself an attractive museum of curiosities. There are antique carved cabinets in the Elizabethan and Renaissance styles containing pottery made by the ancient Mexicans and Peruvians. There is also an extremely fine Rococo cabinet of immense proportions beside which stands an Egyptian mummy in its sarcophagus of chiseled wood 3,000 years old. A sleigh of gilt carved wood of exquisite proportions is laden with Mexican saddles and housings of rare embroidery. A

large sculptured group in plaster represents Columbus and his lieutenant Pinzon in the act of discovering the New World, near to which, on another pedestal, is a large but exquisitely modeled seated figure of Andromeda chained to the rocks. On all sides are portfolios filled with thousands of photographs—the portraits of every known celebrity that has either been born or set foot upon American soil, as well as thousands upon thousands of photographs of the rank and file of American Democracy.

It would require a good sized catalogue to contain a mere list of the thousands of objects exhibited; but really the greatest curiosity of the establishment is Sarony himself, whose den or studio is located at the rear end of the reception room. This apartment is of contracted dimensions, there being only room amidst the desks, portfolios and boxes of stored photographs for a couple of easels, at one end of which is seated the celebrity our correspondent is in search of, and at the other Sarony's artistic coadjutor, Mr. Eugene Nice, who is himself an artist of great ability. The den is barren of everything that approaches luxury. A Bohemian *negligée* characterises the various belongings as though Sarony were carrying out the

principle enunciated by Goethe that luxurious surroundings enervate the creative faculty and simply minister to the development of the imitative powers. Certainly only an anchorite in his cell can boast of more ascetic surroundings than Sarony in his lair.

In personal appearance the artist is below the medium height, and is somewhere about seventy years old; but beneath his grizzled exterior there is the warmth and enthusiasm of a man of twenty. His scarlet fez and his Roman nose are distinguishing features of his physiognomy, and should be an admiring posterity ever coin a medal in memory of his genius these will be salient points of his portrait.

"Would you mind giving THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER your opinion about the present attempt in the State Legislature to prohibit every possible representation of the nude human figure?" was the first inquiry.

"I have heard something of the kind," said Sarony, who was engaged in drawing a figure of ideal beauty on his easel, "but every man of sense knows that there is a proper as well as an improper presentation of the nude figure in art, and to deny this is to proclaim one's self to possess only beastly instincts."

"How would you educate people on this important question?"

"The world is filled with people to whom art is a sealed book. The majority of people are not sufficiently enlightened to know the difference between a modest and an immodest picture, and their own vicious tastes will not permit them to credit the pure-minded artist with having any other object in view than simply ministering to the lower passion of mankind. The world depends upon men like you and me to teach it as to what is right and wrong in art."

"What is the difference between a modest and immodest rendering of the nude human figure?"

"It is purely a matter of sentiment," said Sarony. "You see this picture of a nude girl standing on the back of a dolphin posed with an unconscious grace, her face illumed with a sentiment of childlike gladness and simplicity. Now suppose (and it could easily have been done), suppose I had placed the pupil of her eye right in the corner here, thus making her gazing backward at the spectator with a knowing look, that trifling change in the picture would have altered the character of the entire composition, and have given the figure a cunning look that would have been immodest. As the figure now stands it is a type of childlike grace and beauty, and such a representation of the human figure is no more offensive than a sunbeam or a flower."

And yet such a composition as this, which ranks in art value as well as in modesty of sentiment with the finest productions of Greek sculpture, Mr. Anthony Comstock would condemn under the sweeping phrase of "ancient and modern filth."

"A man," said Mr. Sarony, "who can discover profligacy in the purest ideals of art is incapable of nobility of thought, and must be a stranger to sentiments that do not hinge upon the animal part of his nature. The greatest minds recognize the truth that the highest effort of art is the human figure clothed only with ideal grace."

"How do you suppose a man of presumed intelligence can entertain the Comstockian view of this art question? Is it not a case of conventional hypocrisy?"

"A man of base soul complexion is only happy when he is a source of discomfort and dissension in things he cannot appreciate or understand. I once asked Henry Ward Beecher his opinion of my work and after examining some hundreds of my pictures, said: 'Mr. Sarony, to the pure all things are pure. You have got a faculty of drawing the nude that the French haven't got. Your pictures are conceived in a moral atmosphere.'"

"Mr. Beecher undoubtedly appreciated the high plane of pure sentiment on which your pictures are produced."

"The French," said artist Nice, "in carrying out of their conventional concealment of the human figure can produce a picture that is indecency itself. We have an illustration of this in the production of Jean Beraud, known as *Christ a Madeleine*, in which Christ is represented as seated at a dinner table surrounded by black-coated gentlemen, amidst the smoke of cigars and cigarettes, and Magdalen lies prostrate on the floor in evening dress. A Magdalen clothed in this manner is a travesty on art. The pictures made to illustrate a work by Rabelais are gross, sensual, vulgar compositions conceived with an immoral taste, and many of Rochegrosse's figures are improper in their pose. Even the exquisitely youthful figures in the 'Depart pour le Sabbat,' by Falero, are suggestive of an infernal orgy."

"The white light of moral and physical truth that is radiated from such figures as these (and here Sarony showed his visitor about a dozen new and captivating productions) can only be appreciated by the purest and most artistic souls, but its purity becomes stained in the crime besotted vision of the mass of humanity which sees in the divinest forms an impurity that is only the reflection of their own depravity. This lovely picture of the May Moon, which is intended to express the purity and freshness of the opening year, will cause people whose imaginations run riot in indecency, while clothed to the neck in outward conventionality, to raise a howl of bogus virtue. It is the cacchination of lost souls."

"It makes me mad," interjected artist Nice, "to see men without knowledge, reason or justice condemning things they do not understand. The true artistic temperament is the opposite of the material temperament. It draws vigor and life from the spiritual world of beauty around it. It strives to give expression to the sweetest messages of nature and to express the raptures that are hidden from the sordid eye, in forms that recall voluptuous music and the flowers in imagination's eternally brilliant fields. Societies for the suppression of vice will employ agents that are conspicuously insensible to beauty or art, and in doing so are propagators of crime themselves. We can no more dethrone the nude human figure in art because porcine minds condemn it than we can dethrone the principle of loving one's neighbor as one's self in religion because the vast majority of men are incarnations of greed and selfishness."

"In applying a medicine to cure a disease they have grown so irresponsible that they also seek to kill the patient."

"They take advantage of a praiseworthy mission, which is to weed out of society things manifestly impure, to become iconoclasts of the beautiful, the true and the divine in art. As such they are moral assassins. Figures clothed only with chastity and purity are themselves a living protest against the beastiality that dwells in the human heart, and to assert that debauchery lurks in the innocent portraits of ideal beauty proves that the critic is himself unclean."

"What do you think of those people," said his interrogator, "who, having first esteemed the sentiment of undraped figures, change their opinions on the subject?" "I see it reported that Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt is opposed to the nude in art, and has ordered the decorations of the undraped figures in her villa at Newport to be covered with drapery. Would you say her action is the result of a moral obliquity that sees evil in truth, or is it a timid acquiescence in the conventional opinions of her acquaintances?"

"If the report be true, then this lady's ideas will result in cramping her own higher nature and that of others by insisting on an unnecessary convention of clothes on the nude figures on her walls. The idea is of the same order of intelligence that cramps the waists of women with corsets and their feet

with tight shoes because it is the fashion to do so. It may be an unconscious barbarism on her part, but her action is no less barbarous on that account."

"What do you consider should be the limit of legislative interference in matters of art?"

"Legislative interference with art," said Sarony, "should address itself to cleansing the Augean stable of filthy-mindedness in the masses, and the best method of doing this is to disseminate everywhere the ideal portraiture of the human form in its perfection, not simply the 'nude' in art, but the nude figure clothed with a refined, poetic interpretation of nature; the nude arrayed with the mystical grace of softly molded outline, of the rhythmic flow of limbs, of that unconscious yet captivating beauty of the flesh that expresses the purest movement of the spirit."

"There is in fact a spiritualized flesh as well as an animalized flesh, like the difference between spiritual and carnal love."

"That is my idea exactly," said Sarony.

"And the spiritualized flesh is chosen for its youthful perfection of fiber, its smooth, suave lines, its nobility and tenderness of form."

"That's what I wish you to say about my work."

"And your figures are posed with imagination and sentiment, with the artistic sympathy that emphasizes every perfection, and represses every defect, a sentiment which in the case of a lover becomes adoring love."

"He has got the idea to perfection," said Sarony to Nice, with a pleased smile.

"The highest qualities of the human spirit," said Nice, "are employed by the best artists to produce the masterpieces of literature, painting, sculpture, etc., and why not the masterpieces of photography also, which has now become one of the fine arts? A photograph of a figure which possesses the sacredness of these spiritual forces has as great a reason for its existence as there is a lack of reason for the existence of pictures that are simply phases of vulgarity. Truly the work of Sarony illustrates high moral motives, clothing the animal form with a spiritual grace, thus rescuing the flower-like beauty of the nude from being trampled upon by the coarse animality of the age. In his hands the figure is permeated with refinement, delicacy and unequivocal beauty. He thus places himself in the ranks of those who see in life a grand opportunity to lift man to a higher plane of moral and physical beauty, as opposed to the majority to whom life is only an opportunity for the indulgence of passion and the degradation of humanity."

"Are all your pictures of the human figure based on photographs of the living models?"

"Not all of them, by any means. I produce many pictures in black and white that are drawn directly from the model without the intervention of the camera."

"And in these pictures as well as those based on photographs your specialty is the nude?"

"Certainly. Incidental to my regular business as photographic artist, I have devoted myself to this special line of work for some years past, and my monthly publication, known as 'Sarony's Living Pictures,' contains the finest productions of both pencil and camera."

"Do your models ever catch your inspiration, and dispose themselves just as though they were animated by your own spirit?"

"That is the secret of successful posing. You show me a pose of a figure by the average photographer that has no special sentiment or grace, that is either vulgar or has no *raison d'être*, and I'll give you the same figure and the same pose that will be a work of art."

"Can you make use of the camera to obtain artistic results?"

"The camera with its appurtenances are one kind of brush that I use, and which I employ to increase the intensity of the vision, to inject into art the living, palpitating lines of the actual figure; and while this method of work increases the difficulty of choice, I am, on the other hand, enabled to grasp and exploit the higher rhythm of nature as opposed to the inferior rhythm of art. I think my work proves that photography has aspects personal and individual apart from mechanical considerations. The camera and its appurtenances are, in the hands of an artist, the equivalent of the brush of the painter, the pencil of the draftsman, and the needle of the etcher."



Photographed from Life.

JUNE. BY SARONY.

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